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Group aims to help mental health patients avoid jail

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By Tiffaney Bradley, Reporter [CONNECT](#)

HUNTSVILLE, AL (WAFF) - A Huntsville mother says she's learned the hard way that prison is the only option for some in need of mental health help from the state. Her son is behind bars, and she says she didn't have the resources to keep him out of trouble.

Jacquelin O'Neal's son has a number of health and mental issues. He's in jail after a judge sentenced him to five years for armed robbery.

"He's been diagnosed with anxiety disorder, ADHD, Asperger's Syndrome," said O'Neal. "Also, he has Chiari malformation type one which is a brain disorder."

But O'Neal says her son isn't getting the mental health services and the resources he needs in jail.

"A lot of times they can't conform to being able to deal with a big general population," she said.

O'Neal said her son was diagnosed later in life and he refused much-needed treatments and medications. James Pierce, a licensed counselor, said that's a common problem.

"One-third of the beds in jails are practically, are maybe occupied by people who should be treated for mental health issues," said Pierce.

Pierce is now working to keep mental health patients out of the prison system. He's a part of a new task force called the North Alabama Mental Health Coalition.

"Reason why we formed this coalition for mental health for north Alabama is in order to try to ensure that those people who need help know where to get it," he said.

Pierce said mental health patients have limited resources and services because of the lack of state funding. That's why he hopes his group can help people like O'Neal before their loved ones end up behind bars.

"A lot of times people have to have additional help in order to know where to turn and where to go," said O'Neal.

The North Alabama Mental Health Coalition is now calling on other mental health professionals, law enforcement and anyone who wants to get involved. For more information, call (256) 532-3862.

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